

Navy Yard Main Gate  
8th and M Streets, SE  
Washington Navy Yard  
Washington  
District of Columbia

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Photographs  
Written Historical and Descriptive Data

Historic American Buildings Survey

NAVY YARD MAIN GATE

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NAVY YARD MAIN GATE

Location: M Street on axis with Eighth Street, Southeast,  
Navy Yard, Washington, D. C.

Present Owner: The United States Navy.

Present Use: Principal entrance into the Navy Yard.

Significance: Surviving portion of an early 19th-Century Navy  
Yard structure designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Originally commissioned by the federal government for the Navy, the main gate to the Washington Navy Yard was completed in 1804-05; it has remained in continuous use by the Navy since that time. President Thomas Jefferson commissioned Benjamin Henry Latrobe, then Surveyor of Public Buildings, to prepare the design. Robert Alexander was the chief contractor for the building.

The gate is one of the few structures which survived the 1814 burning of the Navy Yard in the War of 1812. The gate retained its original character until sometime after 1873, after which the flanking guardhouses were obliterated and a three story, brick structure, executed in a Victorian style, flanked the gate to the east and west and crowned the gate portion with two additional stories.

The architect's original drawings have not been located. Nineteenth century drawings on file at the Naval Station Public Works Department show the gate's condition prior to the late 19th-century additions and alterations.

A drawing of the north elevation, dated 1873, shows the gate prior to the alterations and also shows a superimposed pencil study of possible alterations. The design shown on the 1873 drawing is not the design that was finally executed. An undated drawing, presumed to be pre-1873, also has a pencil study of a proposed design alteration superimposed over the north elevation; this design was not executed.

Primary Sources

Files at the Naval Station Public Works Department, Waahington, D. C.

Secondary Sources

Federal Writer's Project Works Administration. Washington City and Capital. Washington, 1937.

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Joint Committee on Landmarks. Landmarks of the National Capital, Waahington, 1965.

Peck, Frederic Taylor. A History of the Naval Gun Factory. Washington, D. C. 2 Vols., Dissertation (Washington, 1950).

Prepared by: Ruasell V. Keune  
Architect, NCDC  
National Park Service  
Washington, D. C.  
January, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Latrobe described the gate as follows in the specifications for his plan for the Washington Navy Yard:

"The design of the main gate of entrance to the navy-yard has been made with a view to the greatest economy compatible with permanence and appearance worthy of the situation. This gate will fall exactly into the range of the Georgia avenue as well as of the Eighth street east of the Capitol, one of the principal streets of this part of the city. I propose that it be built of the species of durable freestone which is only half of the price of that used in the Capitol, and which, though not of so fine a grain, is quite as strong and capable of resisting the weather.

The guard-rooms, within the yard, I pray to erect in brick. The columns being rendered perfectly steady by the weight of the entablature, and having the hinges laid through the joints, are by far the best means of securing (sic) the whole gate in its proper place, whether it be an open iron gate or a solid wood one." P. 22. Hibben, Henry B. Navy Yard, Washington: History from Organization, 1799 to Present Date. 51st Congress, 1st Session, Executive Document 22 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1890).

The original structure, one of the few buildings in the Navy Yard with any architectural ornamentation, was one story in height and consisted of a double gateway with facades to the north and south with the guard-rooms in between.

The north facade was a miniature triumphal arch consisting of solid masonry end blocks flanking a center opening which was divided into three sections by a double row of freestanding Doric columns and topped by a simple entablature. The whole composition was originally crowned by an eagle carved by Giuseppe Franzoni; this eagle was removed in the course of the 19th-century alterations and additions. The three divisions of the north entrance can be closed by the iron gates; the existing gates appear to be the original gates and match the examples shown in the 19th-century drawings. The existing wood partitions over the two flanking pedestrian gates post-date the 1873 drawing. The two, flanking, painted, anchors situated in the recessed niches appear in the 19th-century drawings and are likely original pieces.

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The vehicular entry in the south facade consists of a wide, low, semicircular brick arch. Low arched pedestrian entries flank the vehicular entry. The brick arches are painted black; the brick wall surface is painted cream. The recessed panels over the pedestrian openings, which appear in the 19th-century drawings, have since been filled in; the base of the entablature has been removed.

The interior passageway between the two gateways is bordered on each side by two freestanding Doric columns. The vehicular driveway surface is presently asphalt; the pedestrian walkways are concrete. The wood ceiling is painted cream. The hip roof shown in the 19th-century drawings was removed in the course of later additions.

The 1858 map shows the main gate flanked on the east by the "Marine Officer's Quarters" and on the left by the "Guardhouse and Offices;" it also shows "Gas Light Posts" mounted outside the north entrance to the gate. All of these elements have been obliterated by the later additions.

Prepared by: Russell V. Keune  
Architect, NCDC  
National Park Service  
Washington, D. C.  
January, 1966

ADDENDUM TO  
NAVY YARD, MAIN GATE  
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